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ABSTRACT

The "Voices and Visions" series, a set of instructional videos on the lives and art of 13 important American poets, has the desirable potential to reach an audience that is virtually unlimited. The videos are a skillful blend of photographs, film footage, interviews with scholars, critics, and poets, readings by actors, and sometimes by the poets themselves. These videos were used in a number of non-academic settings for community enrichment in a program sponsored by the American Library Association. Prior to the local programs, a four-week training seminar was presented for the local leaders. In the program conducted by the Carnegie Library, 30 participants ranged in age from graduate students to retired workers. Sample evaluations of participants in the program from around the country demonstrate a vary favorable response. "Telecourses," or instructional systems which include television programs, are being used by almost all colleges, and studies indicate that the use of television to deliver instruction does not change effectiveness. Also, teaching a telecourse allows teachers to focus on closer communication with students, making it more demanding than a traditional course by demanding maturity, responsibility and consistency. The "Voices and Visions" telecourse produced observable improvement in student writing over the semester, showing that regular writing on demanding material is the best way to sharpen critical thinking and writing skills. (Thirteen references are attached.) (HB)

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"Using **Voices & Visions** in the Classroom and in the Community"

By Donna Lund

My purpose today is to share with you my experiences in using Voices & Visions, a set of thirteen videos on the lives and the art of thirteen American poets: Whitman, Dickinson, Frost, Stevens, Pound, Williams, Eliot, Moore, Hughes, Crane, Bishop, Lowell, Plath. The videos that make up the series were produced for the Annenberg/CPB project by the New York Center for Visual History and first broadcast on public television in 1988.

In his 1991 book on The Uses of Television in American Higher Education, James Zigerell describes the potential of a television course to "Satisfy the needs of a number of groups simultaneoulsy: Gifted high school students, selected students confined to correctional institutions, occupational and professional groups, degree-seeking students, groups with special interests like the parents of young children" (25). Because of its content and design, the Voices & Visions series has the desired potential to reach an audience that is virtually unlimited.

Most of us would probably agree with Zigerell's statement that "all students, no matter what their degree of motivation or maturity, welcome production finesse in television programs, accustomed as they are to to the entertainment values of commercial television" (57). Fortunately, the Voice & Visions videos make the most of the special presentational and affective properties of the television medium; the videos are a

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skillful blending of photographs, historical film footage, interviews with scholars, critics and contemporary poets, readings by actors, and, in some cases, the poets themselves. The result is a pleasing mixture of instruction and delight.

Each video has unique features, according to the idiosyncracies of the poet, but all of them include a generous selection of the poetry, read aloud by professional actors or in some cases, the poets themselves.

In an article called "Poetry Out Loud," which appeared in the Atlantic Monthly in February of 1989, Richard Brookheiser states some of the advantages of an aural encounter with poetry. First, he notes a greater appreciation of technique. When a poem is read aloud, the quality of its music is inescapable. Sometimes the quality is a surprise. What seems hard may become softer; what looks easy may grow harder" (44).

The high quality of the readings on the Voices & Visions enhances appreciation of the "music" described by Brookheiser. Jane Alexander's presentation of the words of Emily Dickinson helps us to penetrate some of the mystery of the poetry; Frost's reading of his own poems shows us what he had in mind; James Merrill reads the poems of Stevens with remarkable intensity and perception.

Another significant portion of each video is the extensive information on the poet's life, including visual images of significant places, including recreations of Whitman's New York streets and Civil War hospitals, Dickinson's home, William Carlos Williams' home and office, Lowell's Boston, and Frost's farm in

New Hampshire.

The videos also include interviews with people who knew the poets, such as Malcolm Cowley, whose former wife married Hart Crane, Sylvia Plath's mother, Ezra Pound's daughter, Kenneth Burke on Marianne Moore, and Mary McCarthy on Elizabeth Bishop. Where possible, the videos also feature interviews and footage of the poets themselves.

Another obvious advantage is the opportunity to hear critical commentary by leading scholars, who often do not agree, including Joyce Carol Oates and Adrienne Rich on Dickinson and Alan Ginsberg on Whitman. Excellent analyses are presented by practicing poets, such as Seamus Heaney on Frost, Derek Wolcott on Crane, and James Merrill on Stevens.

Of immense interest to me and of immense value to my students is the ability of each video to give a palpable presence to the times and places inhabited by the poets. By studying the videos in chronological order, students can trace changes in cultural, political, social, artistic currents and relate these elements to features of the poetry.

Obviously, the presentation method in these videos is not a simple lecture mode but rather a fast-moving, entertaining collage of voices and images. There is no single host or expert. Each video stands on its own and was meant to reach out and grab the viewer, whether he knows anything about poetry or not.

I had the opportunity to use the Voices and Visions videos in a non-academic setting in a series of poetry programs for people in the community at the Carnegie Library last spring. The

American Library Association had received a grant from the NEH to conduct these programs in twenty libraries throughout the country, and Pittsburgh was chosen, along with locations ranging from Alaska to the Caribbean. Denise Sticha, Head of Humnaities at the Carnegie Library, and I went to San Antonio for a four-week training seminar in using the videos to bring poetry into the community. The sessions were led by Jospeh Parisi, Editor of POETRY Magazine, and by Diane Middlebrook, Professor of English at Stanford Univesity and author of the recent biography of Anne Sexton. Parisi and Middlebrook conducted model sessions on W.C.WIlliams and on Sylvia Plath respectively. They showed portions of the videos and broke us into small groups for further discussion. They showed by example that, while it is important for the leader to be immersed in the poets/poetry, he or she does not aim to show all he knows, but rather is ready to respond to whatever the participants come up with, and to let the desires and ideas of the participants dictate the flow of the discussion. Our aim would be to empower the participants and encourage them to be actively involved in and perhaps even to lead the learning process.

Joseph Parisi and Diane Middlebrook suggested some of the following approaches:

--Ask questions that lead "away" from poem and some that lead "into"it;

--Read the poem in the context of poet's life or in context of the poet's work;

--Consider various kinds of sameness and difference: universal

or personal; unique or representative; comparison with other poets; gender and racial difference; regions of culture as different sources of imagery;

-- Study poetics by focusing on vocalized fragments or poems on the video soundtrack. A single stanza usually shows the complete range of a formally ordered scheme.

In our training manual, we were reminded that "in many communities, the public library is the only public agency promoting the humanities for the out-of-school adult. Through humanities discussion, the very experiences, thoughts, and feelings of participants are related to literature. We begin to see our lives and concerns in a larger context, and, simultaneously, to understand others the light of these experiences."

In our sessions at the Carnegie Library in Oakland, we tried to put all the above suggestions to work. The thirty participants ranged in age from graduate students to retired teachers and ordinary wokers. They came prepared each week by having read the assigned poems. After a brief introduction, we watched the videos for the first hour, and then broke up into small groups. My function was to circulate the room and facilitate discussion by answering questions or redirecting where necessary. At the end of the evening, we listened to each group's report. The group discussions was so intense that the custodians had to literally throw us out at 9:00 p.m. The critiques written at the end of the series were overwhelmingly favorable. The participants were obviously eager for more poetry

reading and discussion.

Mara Karduck, Administrative Assistant for Public Programs for the American Library Association in Chicago recently sent me sample evaluations of participants in the Voices & Visions programs from various sites across the country. The words of these participants describe the power of the videos in realistic terms:

I greatly enjoyed discussing the poems in small groups.

I understood the poems much better when everyone had a chance to contribute.

I enjoyed hearing everyone else's interpretations of the poems and how they tied these in to their own backgrounds.

It's a chance to discuss our common humanity, to think, to relate experience. Does away with isolation of thought.

The tapes gave me a real feel for each poet.

The tapes were excellent and added greatly to the enjoyment and understanding of the poems. Discussion and comments of the participants were most intertesting. I learned a lot about poetry.

Fresh thoughts, different subjects than the rest of my life.

When asked to name a favorite video, participants commented as follows:

The session on Langston Hughes was most enjoyable. I liked the musical quality of his poems and I think I understand his poetry and what he is saying.

I came to see Emily Dickinson's work in an entirely

different light.

I enjoyed Emily Dickinson. I don't agree with her philosophies of relgion and life at all, but I find her poems challenging.

Elizabeth Bishop was my first encounter with a modern "woman" poet. I identified with her deepest thoughts and feelings mutually shared.

Bishop because she expresses thoughts in terms more easily comprehended.

The one on Robert Frost, perhaps because his poetry is familiar and I like his thoughts.

T.S. Eliot, because I learned I was not SUPPOSED to understand him.

Walt Whitman because the video and his poems were inspirational to me.

I experienced disappointment..sadness with human failings, e.g. Walt Whitman's tormented life and Williams' loneliness.

While the poetry series at the Carnegie Library reached out to people of all ages and education, and was offered for the sheer joy of it, I had a somewhat different experience in using the thirteen videos as a three credit literature course at the college where I teach.

In my discussion of **Voices and Visions** as a "telecourse," I use the definition given in the FACULTY HANDBOOK prepared by PBS Adult Learning Service: "A television course is a complete and integrated instructional system that generally includes television programs, a textbook, and a variety of other instructional materials designed to be used by faculty and students as the principal components of a college course. The materials generally reflect the contributions of top scholars and curriculum designers from throughout the country and have been evaluated and refined through testing." According to The Higher Education Utilization Study, ninety percent of the nation's 3,000 colleges and universities make some use of television for instruction. Most use consists of one-way instruction in an on-campus setting delivered to students through closed circuit systems or direct videocasette replay of prerecorded lessons. But more and more colleges are now offering complete telecourses (such as Voices & Visions). Since the start of PBS Adult Learning Service in 1981, over 1400 colleges have offered complete telecourses in cooperation with more than 300 public television stations.
When I called PBS last month, I was told that every semester, approximately 30-50 colleges across the country offer Voices & Visions as a credited television course.

James Zegerell (1991) summarizes the institutional benefits of telecourses as follows:

1. Telecourses successfully recruit new students to conventional classrooms.

2. Telecourses encourage imaginative community education programs that extablish a place in the community.

3. Telecourses trigger professional development activity and valuable curriculum rethinking among traditional faculty.

As more and more postsecondary institutions grapple with declines in the size of the traditional college age-student population and redefine their missions to emphasize greater community involement and life-long learning, telecourses offer increasingly important opportunities and options to meet the needs of higher education institutions today.

A number of studies have examined the effects of learning from television. After a review of 300 studies, Chu and Schramm (1967) concluded that "there is no significant difference between television instruction and traditional classroom instruction" (103). In 1987, Jerome Johnston brought this research up to date and reached the same conclusions as Chu and Schramm.

What these and other studies are saying is that the use of television to deliver instruction does not change effectiveness of the instruction either positively or negatively. However, television-delivered instruction is at least equivalent to traditional, classroom-based instruction in its learning effectiveness. A 1987 study by Whittington found that students in a variety of televised courses received similar grades to those earned in traditional face-to-face classrooms.

This conclusion is further supported by evaluations of the first five television-based courses funded by the Annenberg/CPB Project (<u>The Constitution: That Delicate Balance;</u> <u>The Brain</u>;

Congress: We the People; THe New Literacy: An Introduction to Computers; and The Write course: An Introduction to Composition).

The primary difference between television courses and traditionally taught courses is the manner in which instruction is delivered to students. Traditional students may come to campus for direct instruction by a faculty member several times a week; television course students work more independently, watching the television programs and reading the print materials at home and/or at work, with guidance from the course faculty through a variety of channels, including class meetings, individual conferences, many phone conversations, and instructional memos. Thus, faculty in a telecourse situation are more likely to focus on communicating with students in a personal manner that is often tutorial in nature.

In a 1988 study, Valerie Crane interviewed faculty who use telecourses offered by PBS. She concluded (and I agree) that a telecourse requires much more personal contact in the form of individual conferences and many phone calls as well as letters and written responses to student writing.

Television courses provide faculty with new instructional resources yet rely on faculty to use all of the skills employed in traditional teaching. Students register, pay tuition, and then attend several orientation meetings wherein I describe the requirements of the course, pass out assignments, and set up additional meeting dates. Last fall I met my students twice in September and once each in October, November, and December. I graded twenty-five sets of 4-5 pages writing assignments every

week, prepared new assignments for each poet, prepared and graded a mid-term and final, and collected, read, and graded journals at the end of the semester. Obviously, teaching a telecourse does NOT lessen the paper load or the preparation time required.

At my college we expected to attract a different, non-traditional student with our telecourse. Instead, our experience corresponds to those at other colleges, as reported by Valerie Crane in her 1988 study of sample students from five Annenberg/CPB courses at 25 institutions. Crane describes the typical telecourse student:

1. About two/thirds were female.

Zegerelli (1991) suggests that women see telecourses as a way to get credits without having to leave home and neglect responsbilities, and that women as a group, "seem to possess the degree of repsonsiblity that is prerequisite to success in independent study" (128).

2. Crane's study reported 75-80% of the students were working during the course.

3. Crane's study found three quarters of telecourse students were matriculating for a degree, taking conventional classes on campus at the same time. Zigerell adds the caveat that enrollment is higher if the course satisfies some definite curriculum requirement. "Telecourse students as a rule, are attracted not so much by the intrinsic interest of a course's content as they are by whether or not the course helps them move a bit closer to their ultimate academic goals" (130). Crane found that the "overriding reason for students enrolling in telecourses is that

they are a convenient way to further their educational goals...they appreciate the independence and self-pacing allowed by telecourses...telecourses permit students to reduce conflicts with work and parenting schedules...telecourses permit many part-time students to accelerate progress toward a degree" (55).

Despite all these advantages, only a mature student can handle the high degree of personal reponsibility. Jaesam Chung reminds us that "Telecourses have typically been developed to teach mature, self-motivated learners," and in this sense, "telecourses can be used to promote student independence" (43). The growth of autonomy results when students have control over timing and sequence of course content. Zigerell (1991) states "One reality cannot be asserted often enough: college level telecourses, like other independent study options, presuppose as a condition of success a student with a high level of motivation, adequate academic preparation, and firm career and curriculum goals...Study by television is not for everyone"(132).

Of the twenty-five students who registered for Voices & Visions telecourse last fall, several had day-time jobs and were pursuing a degree on a part-time basis, but most were regular day students who thought the flexible schedule would suit them better than that of a regular class. Unfortunately, some proceeded on the mistaken belief that the course would allow them to lie in front of the tv once a week and get college credit. The stark truth is that this course is much more demanding than a regular course, for the teacher as well as the students. Success in this course requires maturity, responsibility, time-management and

self-discipline.

I tried to ensure that a student would spend as much time on this telecourse as on any other college course, but some of the students were simply not used to producing quality work on a weekly basis. The key was the weekly assignment that had to be handed in every Monday so the student could go on to the next poet. There was no opportunity to put the reading off to the end of the term, as students may assume they can do. Instead of a long research paper they could produce in some dim future, they had specific written responses that had to be completed on a regular basis.

I made myself available for individual conferences and encouraged students to attend the general meetings. Yet, the level of frustration remained very high for the people who were undisciplined. This course was not the "easy breeze" some had mistakenly assumed. According to Crane's 1984 study of the First Five Years of Annenberg/PBC telecourses, some students in these telecourses reported that "as the semester progressed, they fell behind in their reading and thus read the print after viewing the program" (37). My instructions were for students to read the poems first, make initial journal entries, then view the video and finally re-read the poems and make aditional journal entries. In my worst case imaginings, I see my students fast-forwarding the "boring" parts of the videos or worse yet, doing the assignments without watching the videos at all.

The mature, successful students were able to handle the regularity of the work load and they appreciated the control they

had over their own time and the pace of instruction. They could replay a video or stop it to take notes as they required. Many students taped the programs from the educational television channel; others watched them in our library or, most frequently, checked the videos out for use at home.

From even the successful students, I heard expressions of regret for the lack of opportunity to discuss the poems with others. I tried to make the weekly assignments a form of dialogue with me about the poems, but I was forced to concede there is no substitute for group discussion of what a poem can mean. In Crane's study of the first five Annenberg CPB telecourses, the same disadvantage was noted by other students and teachers who complained of "lack of classroom discussion and regular contact with students, as well as problems of engaging students who require more structure" (23).

Despite certain reservations and frustrations, the students had to admit at the end of the term that they had learned quite a bit about poetry, about American history and culture, and about themselves. As Zigerell (1987) points out, "researchers are in agreement that, of all the mass media, television is the most powerful and has an effect on learning, these effects varying with with the viewer's age, aptitude, educational background, and the subject matter being taught" (74).

One of the most rewarding results of teaching the Voices & Visions telecourse was the observable improvement in student writing over the semester. Since they were required to write four or five pages of response to my questions as well as journal

entries for every one of the one hundred poems I assigned over the term, they were forced to think deep thoughts and get them down on paper every week. Reading these papers strengthened my conviction that regular writing on demanding material such as that covered in the Voice & Vision series is the best way to sharpen critical thinking and writing skills we all know students need.

This experience caused me to change the structure of regular literature courses I teach. I now assign short weekly papers based on reader response. I use these papers as the basis of class discussion, which has been lively and vigorous because all the students have read the material and all are eager to explain their own ideas and negotiate possible interprettions with others in the class.

Despite some disadvantages and difficulties which arise from the nature of a telecourse, I will continue to teach Voices and Visions because the advantages far outweigh the problems. I believe this series has many possibilities for enriching the college or high school classroom, or for adult and community education.

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